

# Vembanad Lake and Tourism

EQUATIONS

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*This paper covers the impacts that tourism has had on the Vembanad Lake, the communities living around it and the impact on their livelihood. Vembanad Lake covers an area of 200 km<sup>2</sup> and is the largest lake in Kerala. Alappuzha, Kottayam, and Ernakulam districts border it. The development of tourism in Vembanad Lake could be attributed to the Nehru Trophy Boat Race held on the Punnamda Lake, near Alappuzha every year. Now the lake attracts more than a hundred thousand tourists a year. This increase in tourism contributed to a temporary rise in employment and contributes to short-term contractual labour, but overall the sector employs a marginal percentage of local workforce. The development of the tourism industry has reduced land holdings of the communities, destroyed the ecosystem and dependent livelihoods, and there is reported trafficking of women. The development of tourism also undermines local government authority and decision-making.*

Vembanad Lake, the largest lake in Kerala covers an area of 200 km<sup>2</sup>, and is bordered by Alappuzha, Kottayam, and Ernakulam districts. The lake lies at sea level, and is separated from the Arabian Sea by a narrow barrier island. Several rivers flow into the lake, including the Achenkovil, Manimala, Meenachil, Muvattupuzha, Pamba and Periyar. The lake surrounds the islands of Pathiramanal, Perumbalam and Pallippuram. The northern extension of Vembanad Lake from Kochi Azhi to Munambam Azhi, the serene backwaters is popularly known as Veeranpuzha.

The development of tourism in Vembanad Lake could be attributed to the Nehru Trophy Boat Race held on the Punnamda Lake, near Alappuzha every year. The Boat race which started in 1952 got into the tourism realm probably in the early eighties. The tourism Department by then has started promoting the boat race as a tourism product to the foreign and domestic tourists. Now this has become a tourism event with more than lakhs of people including foreign tourists visiting the Vembanad Lake. The tourists who visited the lake during the festive time were slowly attracted by the calmness and beauty of the lake.

Kumarakom was one of the destinations around the Vembanad Lake to capitalize on the tourism potential at an earlier stage. Kumarakom situated on the banks of the Vembanad Kayal is 10 km. west of the Kottayam District Head Quarters in Kerala. Kumarakom is famous for a bird sanctuary home to 91 species of local and 50 species of migratory birds. Kumarakom also has a number of mangrove species, of which three are reported only from Kumarakom. The mangrove forests are also the feeding and breeding grounds for numerous species of fishes. Blessed with the backwaters and pristine nature, Kumarakom is known for its Kayal, Kuil and Karimeen (Lake, Bird and Fish).

Tourism Development in Kumarakom started with the lease of KTDC land in the bird sanctuary area to Taj Kerala Resorts Limited in the 1989. Tourism has developed rapidly in the area after that and former Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit and his popular Kumarakom Musings created much hype among tourists in this otherwise calm destination. Kumarakom Panchayat at present has 8 big resorts contributing to 580 beds and creating direct employment opportunities of 740 and indirect employment opportunities of 324. There are 7 small resorts and more than 20 lodges and home stay facilities contributing to another 100 beds. In total, there are around thirty accommodation facilities contributing direct employment of 966 and indirect employment of 347. In addition to this 13 big resorts are under construction.<sup>1</sup> Panchayat is earning 20 lakhs as tax from the industry and it claims that tourism industry's revenue comes around 30 crores in this small destination.<sup>2</sup>

With tourism gaining momentum in Kumarakom, the tourism department considered developing the adjacent Pathiramanal Island for tourism activities. The former President Sankar Dayal Sharma laid the foundation stone for tourism development activities in the late nineties. An Entrance Gate and walkways were created as part of the project. In 2000, there was a move by the government to lease the Pathiramanal Island to a private resort group. This was opposed by the Muhamma Panchayat and Kottayam Nature Society challenged this move in the Court. The Supreme Court in January 2006 specifically directed that the State Government should take "a fresh decision in the matter. The new government that assumed office in May 2006 has decided to develop Pathiramanal Island as a biodiversity park instead of leasing out to resort group. Although the Biodiversity Park proposal speaks about conservation, it has proposed ecotourism activities in the third phase. Ropeway connecting Pathiramanal to Muhamma, operation of traditional and paddle boats, creation of walkways within the island are proposed in the third phase.

The tourism started spreading to other areas of Vembanad Lake in the due time. Resorts have started coming in the Alappuzha region also. There are around 10 big resorts in this part of the Vembanad Lake. In addition to this, homestays have come in large number in this area. Even the new concept that is emerging popular – Floatels (Floating Hotels) has come in at one of the islands – Kodamthuruthu.

### Impacts of Tourism

In Kumarakom, the arrival of tourism industry was well received by the local people initially with the land value increasing many folds in the potential areas for tourism ventures. They offered their agricultural lands and paddy fields for tourism construction at exorbitant price. Although the conversion of land reduced the agricultural yield and employment, the temporary employment opportunities in the construction sector and relatively higher wages earned, made the local workers happy. But all was not well in the years to come.

<sup>3</sup>**Table: Employment Sector and Wages**

Employment sector	Wages for Men	Wages for Women
Paddy Cultivation	Rs.120 – Rs.150	Rs.60 – Rs.80
Construction work	Rs.160	Rs.125
Construction work in tourism sector	Rs.160	Rs.125

The employment opportunity in the tourism sector was not favourable to the local community with 80% of the regular employees in big hotels appointed from outside Kumarakom. A study conducted by EQUATIONS in 2000, “Women’s participation in tourism development” revealed that most of the labourers lost their traditional occupation. Women and agricultural labours displaced from the lands converted for tourism could not be compensated with alternative jobs. The contract labourers appointed by the tourism industry did not have job security and were terminated at any time without assigning any reason. Although these workers are eligible for minimum wages, they are paid at much lower rates.

The clustering of the resorts on the banks of Vembanad Kayal denied access to local people involved in fishing and shell collection to the Kayal. The increased number of speedboats, motor boats and house boats plying as part of the of tourism development has resulted in the damage of fishing nets of the community as well as the privacy of the women and children who used to wash clothes, clean utensils or take baths in the Vembanad lake.

Tourist Resorts have even gone to the extent of privatising and appropriation of Kayal and use it to promote their business without due regard to the regulations placed by the Panchayat. The natural banks of Kayal, once covered with thick mangrove forest are replaced by granite walls by the resort owners to get uninterrupted vision of Kayal from their property. The cutting down of mangrove forests has completely destructed the breeding grounds of fishes resulting in the diminishing of number in fishes. The fish species – Half beak (Hemir amphus) that were abundant in the lake is now reduced resulting many fishermen unemployed.

The Hotel Waterscapes of the Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) is situated very near to the bird sanctuary and mangrove forests. The two mangrove swamps on the northwest corner of the KTDC complex were the only breeding ground for Night Herons in Kerala in the eighties. The clearance of trees in the entrance area of the complex has ensured the vanishing of one third of bird population in the last decade. The attack on the mangroves by KTDC still continues as the mangroves at the bird sanctuary have been drastically cut in February 2004 for easy visibility of birds for the tourists. The Taj Group had placed bright lights in the hotel to avoid the birds coming to their property. The flocks of migrant ducks and teals that came in thousands to the lakes have disappeared with the tourists enjoying their flight by chasing them in speedboats. The bird census conducted in the area periodically has clearly shown the impact of tourism development on bird population. The Vembanad Water Count featured 36,498 birds in 1993, 22,195 birds in 2001 and 13,274 birds in 2002.<sup>4</sup> Although there has been increase in number of birds during 2003-2005 due to the revisit of migratory ducks and teals, according to the Report of the Vembanad Water Fowl Census 2006, the total number of birds spotted this year was only 40 per cent of that spotted the year before.<sup>5</sup>

As part of the Ecocity project, the Minor Irrigation Department has recently come up with a proposal to provide boating in the canals within the bird sanctuary area. The project also proposes removal of weeds & silt, deepening the canal ensuring a minimum water depth of 1.00m and widening the canal for ensuring a minimum width of 4m at all stretches of the canal. The stretches of the canal are covered with endangered species of mangroves. The project also proposes protecting the banks of the canal at needed locations. Standard Rubble masonry protection wall with a

height of 2m is proposed for the retaining the wall. The proposers of the project are unsure how the mangroves protect the banks of the canal.

The wastes from hotels and wastes including human excreta from houseboats are dumped into the lake. The total coliform count in the lake is much higher than the maximum prescribed value. The number of coliform in 100 ml of lake water is 15000 to the permissible limit of 500 maximum/100 ml for ecologically sensitive and contact water sports. The out board engines provided in the houseboats spill kerosene into the water adding to the pollution. The fishes caught from the Lake have become inedible because of the kerosene taste.

It is shocking to hear that the local people collected syringes and bottles of narcotic drugs floating in the Vembanad Lake last year. This could have been thrown from the houseboats plying in the area. The study "Trafficking in Women and Children in India", conducted by the National Human Rights Commission published in January 2006 states that "in places like Alappuzha, foreign tourists stay in houseboats, making houseboat sex tourism a new and thriving concept. This is a safe method, as there are hardly raids on houseboats." Tourists have to spend around Rs.5000 to 10000 for staying in big hotels. With the same amount, they can hire houseboats is something attracting tourists for sex tourism. Allegations are also there that blue film production is also taking place in houseboats. The police patrolling in the Vembanad Kayal was tightened on the limelight of the news that blue film was produced in a houseboat owned by one of the major resort owners, sometime back. But the police patrolling was withdrawn on the allegation by the hotel owners that it is creating annoyance for the tourists.

Another reported incident is that girls from Bangalore are flowing to the resorts of Kumarakom in Kottayam district for illegal activities on the pretext of tourism. The girls who reach Kottayam would be taken to some of the big hotels and private resorts in Kumarakom by the agents. This arrangement is being made for the high-end guests who stay in these hotels. The girls brought for the purpose are of age between 17 and 23. Attraction for girls in this is handful of money and that there is only remote chance for getting caught. One of the girls said that remuneration amounts to two thousand rupees per day. There are girls who come twice a month. The agents get special commission ranging from Rs.1000 to Rs.3000 based on the age for getting the girls from the hotel owners. The girls who come in the morning would return in the evening bus and reach Bangalore the next morning. (Mangalam 25.06.2004)

### **The Way Forward**

Most of the problems emerging out of tourism are due to lack of planning and regulations. It's usually the Panchayats who face the brunt of problems emerging out of such unplanned tourism development in the region. It is important to note that the Kumarakom Panchayat had come up with a People's Charter and Draft Guidelines on Sustainable Tourism for Kumarakom to regulate tourism based on the Powers and Functions of the Panchayat devolved as per the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act under the broad mandate of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution. The People's Charter and Draft Guidelines demanded for the preparation of Master Plan for tourism development within the Panchayat and has put up regulations on new constructions, tourism activities and utilisation of common resources. The Charter also insists the tourism industry to ensure direct and indirect employment opportunities for the local people and to contribute to the projects of priority for the well being of the community and conservation of the environment, in the backdrop of overall socio-economic development of the region. A thrust has been given to the concepts of social obligations of tourism industry and its corporate accountability. The Charter also demands the creation of an expert committee to look into the conceptualisation, planning, implementation and monitoring of tourism development within the Kumarakom Panchayat.

To engage in tourism development with watchdog role and set future broad development paradigm, the Panchayat created a Functional Committee on Tourism as per Section 163 (1) of the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, which allows the Panchayat to form functional committees on different subjects. The Act also allows the Panchayat to nominate expert members from different field who are interested in the public welfare. The Chairperson and Secretary of the Committee were the President and Secretary of the Kumarakom Grama Panchayat respectively. The other members of the Committee included all Panchayat Members, Tourism Expert, District Town Planning Officer, Environmentalist, Economist, Local NGOs and representatives from the Tourism Industry. This model actually lays the foundation for democratisation of decision-making in tourism at site-specific level.

The first meeting of the Functional Committee approved the Peoples Charter and had discussions on the preparations of Master Plan on land use for tourism purpose, the conservation of bird sanctuary, plastic waste disposal in Kayal by the tourists. The Committee also decided to function as a monitoring cell on tourism. The Functional Committee got dissolved with the new Panchayat assuming office and the new committee is yet to be reconstituted.

The most important development after that was the creation of a sustainable tourism forum outside the Functional Committee framework. The purpose of the forum is to monitor and to bring in effective mechanisms to see that the tourism development brings in less damage to the society and the environment and brings in maximum economic benefit to the local community. This forum is now doing the Tourism Impact Assessment (Environment, Social & Economical) of the region to understand clearly how tourism has affected the village in the recent past. The forum would analyse the tourism scenario based on the impact assessment and would demand for necessary changes in policy for corrective action.

The Kerala Government has come up with the Kerala Tourism (Conservation and Preservation of Areas) Act, 2005 in February 2005. By the Act, the government can declare any area which have or likely to have the importance of tourism within the State as "Special Tourism Zone" (STZ) and form centralized committees that could decide on the tourism development within the STZ. Kumarakom has been already declared as a STZ and the act could be used as a tool to usurp the powers of panchayats and make the Functional Committees constituted as per the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act unfunctional.

The need of the hour is to fight against the system that centralizes decision making and allowing the local community to take decisions on tourism planning and regulations. The model adopted by Kumarakom Panchayat challenges the State Government's policy of centralization and other panchayats on the banks of Vembanad could adopt similar lines for proper regulation of tourism within the existing framework of laws.

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## End Notes

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1 Kumarakom An insider's introduction, P G Padmanabhan, pp 159, February 2006

2 Tourism Janakeeya Badal. Kerala Shashtra Sahitya Parishad , January 2003

3 pg no.46, Tourism Vikasanam, Keralathil, Joji Koottummel, KSSP November 2001

4 Development Report 2002, Kumarakom Grama Panchayat, October 2002.

5 Vembanad conservation reserve likely to be set up, The Hindu Online Edition 17.06.2006